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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANILA 005460

SIPDIS

STATE FOR INR/EAP, EAP, AND EAP/MTS
STATE PASS TO USIP/SOLOMON
SECDEF/OSD/ISA/AP FOR ALLEN

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SUBJECT: MILF/US TIES: A NEW BALLGAME

REF: MANILA 5372

Classified By: (U) Acting Pol/C Paul O'Friel for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

1. (C/NF) Summary. According to Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) negotiator, each major constituency of the MILF was represented in the November 15 meeting between MILF Central Committee members and Emboffs, and the MILF leadership recognized the Embassy approach was a "different ball game." Despite the evident MILF interest in development assistance, some MILF hardliners may not yet be convinced of the desirability of cutting ties to terrorists. End Summary.

2. (C/NF) In follow up to their November 15 meeting with MILF Central Committee members (reftel), poloffs met in Manila on November 18 with MILF peace process negotiators Michael Mastura and Musib Buat, who had helped broker the earlier meeting. Mastura commented that Vice Chairman Ghazali Jafaar had carefully selected the Central Committee members for the November 15 meeting. Muhammed Ameen and Jun Mantawil are from the Secretariat of the Central Committee; Mantawil is also a member of Chairman Murad's office. Bobby Mulana Alonto is a member of the Peace Panel; Sheikh Khalifa Nando is a member of the Tribunal; Sheikh Ahmad Dule is chief of the MILF's Middle Eastern Affairs Bureau. Mastura observed that each major constituency within the MILF had been represented.

3. (C/NF) Mastura stated that the MILF recognized the Embassy approach was "a different ball game," signifying a step beyond previous contacts through the US Institute of Peace (USIP). "We know the US Government is reaching out," he said. Pressed on the need for the MILF to take concrete, verifiable steps to cut ties of all its elements with terrorist organizations, Mastura said only that the MILF understood the seriousness of the US position.

4. (C) Mastura explained that the MILF's philosophy on the peace talks was to "play its cards close to its vest" and pursue slow, methodological, and incremental process to achieve its objectives. "We don't want to be locked into a failed agreement like the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF)," Mastura said, adding that Chairman Murad continued to build consensus within the MILF in support of peace and to prepare the organization for a comprehensive agreement. According to Mastura, the MILF's aim was to begin building upon the cease-fire and the converging points of agreement with the GRP to create institutions focused on development. He noted that the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team (IMT) already had a non-military component -- two Libyan diplomats and 10 non-military personnel from Brunei are IMT members -- that could easily transition to development assistance.

5. (C/NF) COMMENT. While moderate negotiators like Mastura and Buat with a vested interest in a successful conclusion to the peace process may understand the need to take verifiable steps to cut ties with terrorists, Chairman Murad's "consensus approach" likely has to win over all hardliners, such as Abdul Wahid Tondok and Ameril Kato, who appear to continue to shelter Jemaah Islamiyah and Abu Sayyaf Group terrorists.

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Jones